



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Office of Marine Safety

Date: January 1, 2003

Place: Marine Safety Office, United States Coast Guard
Miami, Fl.

Briefing Attendees:

National Transportation Safety Board

Robert B. Ford, IIC

James Walsh, Survival Factors Investigator

U.S. Coast Guard

Lt. Cdr. Larry Bowling, Chief Investigations/Inspections

Mr. Paul Bates, Small Passenger Vessel Inspector

CWO Marcos DeJesus, Inspector

CWO Troy Ivey, Inspector

INTRODUCTION

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board met with Coast Guard Officers from the Marine Safety Office, Miami, Fl. on January 1, 2003. (See attendees above). The meeting concerned the investigation into the sinking of the Small Passenger Vessel *Panther*. The text that follows is not a verbatim record of the conversation. It has been developed from my handwritten notes of the conversation and is correct and complete to the best of my knowledge and recollection.

Summary

The investigative teams met at the Coast Guard Marine Safety Office, Miami Florida. Lieutenant Commander Bowling informed the NTSB team that Lt. Eric LaSalle was the Senior Investigating Officer for the Coast Guard. Mr. Bowling stated that Coast Guard headquarters had notified him that the Coast Guard was the lead agency in the investigation into the sinking of the *Panther*. Mr. Bowling stated that the first responders on scene were from MSD Ft. Myers and were relieved by Ms. Nicole Arroyo and CWO DeJesus from MSO Miami.

According to Mr. Bowling, there was an inconsistency regarding the number of passengers on board at the time of the sinking. The owner stated that there were 29 passengers on board and he based the count on the number of ticket stubs that were sold. The master believed there were 34 passengers on board. The master's count was based on taking a count of the empty seats and subtracting from a full load of passengers. According to the Certificate of Inspection, the vessel was required to carry a deckhand when the passenger count was 30 or more. The initial Coast Guard responders from Marine Safety Detachment Ft. Myers reported that the vessel did not have a deckhand on board at the time of the sinking.

The master had provided the Coast Guard with a typed statement and a copy was provided to NTSB investigators.

According to the Coast Guard, the master was not tested for alcohol use following the accident. Park Service enforcement rangers, based on their on-scene observations of the master, did not notice any indication of alcohol use. The Rangers contacted Mr. Bowling at MSO Miami and Mr. Bowling concurred with the decision.

Mr. Bates and Mr. Ivey had made an inspection of the vessel after it had been hauled out of the water. They found a long crack beneath the strut. They also stated that there was a rumor that the vessel had grounded some time in December. The inspectors followed with an inspection of the other tour boats. The lifejackets on the boats were stowed beneath the seats and had bolted covers that were identical to the design on the *Panther*. The Coast Guard had the covers removed so that the lifejackets would be accessible.

END OF INTERVIEW

Robert B. Ford